

Q: General Potter, the first thing I'd like to discuss with you is your family background: your parents, what your father did, your mother, where you were born, and so forth. Why don't we start off talking about your parents? What was your father's background?

A: Well, the family history, I think, is pretty interesting. I had a great-grandfather who spent a lot of money preparing a very thick and large book called, The Potters in America. He started out with discovering seven Potters who'd come from England over here, oh, way back when, about just after the Mayflower. My particular branch stems from a fellow named George, who was born in England and had a son, Abel, and Abel was married in 1669, and he died in 1692. And, of course, the family seems to have been fairly prolific, but it all ended up with my father having been born in Chelsea, Massachusetts. My grandfather, at some time or other, had moved west with his six or seven children. They came west to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and some time later, my grandfather and, I guess, most of the children, except about three, moved back to Chelsea, as a matter of fact to Everett, Massachusetts.

My father was William Bradford, who was born on October 26, 1873, and died in 1937. He and my mother were married in 1904. Her name was Arlie Bell Johnson. She was the adopted child of a Civil War veteran, who lived in an Old Soldiers' Home up in Menasha, Wisconsin. My father had several jobs. He was not well up in the financial hierarchy by any means. In fact we had a very touchy life. I remember at some time in my early age when he came home all full of joy, and his pay had been increased to \$1.00 a day!

But, he did work for the government during World War I, and as a result of that, we left Oshkosh, moved to Beloit, Wisconsin, for about a year, year-and-a-half, and then to Toledo, Ohio. And, that was just about the time I was starting in high school. I was born July 17, 1905. I had two brothers, one of whom is still alive. And in

Toledo, Ohio, I went to one of the two high schools that then existed in the city by the name of Scott High School. Went there for four years, graduated in 1922 and went to the University of Toledo, which was just then starting, for one year during which time my mother, who was a very active woman--I mean, she wasn't a sit-down housewife--proceeded to get me an appointment to West Point, where I entered in 1923, July first. First time I'd ever been away from home.

Q: Were you eager to go to West Point?

A: Oh, yes. I'd always wanted--like so many kids, we read those books My First Year at West Point, My Second Year at West Point. I forget the author, but it was a series of books, first, second, third, and fourth year at West Point. I became attracted to it, and went to West Point, and had a pretty good record there. During my senior year, my first-class year, I was made a cadet captain and put in charge of a plebe company--new recruits coming in--and one of the new plebes decided he didn't like life at West Point. And as was the custom in those days each fellow who resigned had to sign a piece of paper saying, "I was or was not hazed." He put down that he was hazed, and there was quite an investigation. As a result five of us were suspended from the military academy for a year. I came back in 1927, as a buck private, by the way, and graduated in 1928 and was able to get in the Corps of Engineers.

Q: Let me ask you a few questions about the West Point experience. Did you enjoy the academy?

A: Oh, intensely. Intensely. Even then it was a great education. But of course it was in those days aimed at producing officers for the military. As I understand it that's been--the main purpose is still to produce officers for the military--but the education is much broader. Our education aimed a great deal at military practices in that era plus a great deal of engineering.

Q: What about the discipline at West Point? I guess all the cadets when they first came into West Point had to endure something called "Beast Barracks." Do you recollect anything about that?

- A: Oh, yes. Hazing was a way of life. It was expected. You endured it. I think it was good for you! We had an old thing called running the stairs. Each area of the barracks was four stories high, and when you blinked your eye wrong, why, you were told to run ten tours of the stairs and for awhile at least I held the cadet record for time in running the stairs. Guess that's the only thing that's in my West Point bio, really.
- Q: Do you recall anything about a cadet by the name of Jack Herbert?
- A: Jack Herbert was a very dear friend of mine, yes. He, after I was suspended, and later on, told me that when he was questioned about whether he was hazed or not, he indicated that he tried to obfuscate the answer.
- Q: Wasn't there a story about Herbert's "gut and butt?" That he seemed to be protruding a bit both ways?
- A: Well, he was not a skinny guy.
- Q: And, did you haze him a bit about that?
- A: We tried to correct his posture.
- Q: What West Point classmates did you maintain contacts with during the rest of your life? Were there any particular ones that you remained close to?
- A: Well, unfortunately, of course, I was fairly close, or very close, to my own class, and they gave me permission to wear the 1927 class ring, which I've always done. But, coming back to a class that I'd assisted in hazing, it was a bit of a different way of life. So I do have dear friends of both classes, but not extensively.
- Q: Could you give me a few of the names?
- A: Luke Finley and I have seen each other several times, mostly due to the kind of life I had in the military and afterwards, and not having served a great deal with troops, keeping up these relationships has just not fitted in. But some of

them are very dear, though as I told you before, Mrs. Potter and I are not what you would call visiting people, and most of my friends since the war have been made in civilian life.

Q: I see. Let me ask you a couple of questions which I'm sort of curious about. Well, one at least: your name is William E. Potter, but you evidently rather early took the name Joe, and I'm wondering why.

A: Well, the day I reported into the military academy I was assigned to the 7th Division of barracks, in the old barracks, and each two divisions had a janitor, who was in charge of taking care of the halls. My division of barracks had a rotund, big, mustachioed Yankee, pudgy fellow by the name of Joe Potter, and the first day I was there the first-class men said, "From now on your name is Joe Potter." And, as a result I'd say that most people don't know I have another name, and they'll come to town, like you may have, not knowing my real name, and look in the phone book for Joe Potter, and you would not have found me! It's almost as good as a restricted number.

Q: [laughter] To jump ahead just for a moment, I want to get a couple of personal details out of the way. Could you tell us when you were married, how many children you have, and what their names are?

A: I was married in 1936, and I have two children, two daughters. JoAnn lives here with three of my grandchildren--Mark, Kent, and Stephen. The last two were born in Kenya. Susan lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, with three of my grandchildren--Gunner, Kendall, and Amanda. Neither of the husbands were in the military.

Q: And what's the name of your wife?

A: My wife's name is Ruth, or Ruthie, Ruthie T., and her name was Turner when I married her in Grafton, West Virginia.

Q: Let's go back then to after you got out of West Point, date of graduation, 9 June 1928. You were assigned as a second lieutenant at Fort DuPont, Delaware. What were your responsibilities at Fort DuPont?

A: Well, I guess first, to be disciplined in not being a first-class cadet, but becoming a very low second lieutenant, even of Engineers, which of course was the prideful place to be in those days, was a major change. I was assigned to one of the companies of the 1st Engineers, part of which was up at Monmouth, New Jersey. I think three companies, including the headquarters, were at Fort DuPont, and my first commander was a Captain Matthews. I stayed there just about a year doing normal company duties, you know, drilling and rifle range. We used to spend months on the rifle range in those days. Now they spend days or weeks on the rifle range. But, military training in those days was, as against today, quite simple because the equipment that the Army had in those days, the fighting equipment, consisted of a rifle, a machine gun, and a BAR, and maybe a 37 mm gun. I mean that's about all you had to worry about, and everybody knew how to take a machine gun apart and their rifle apart, an old Springfield, and it was much simpler than it is today with all the highly technical equipment that any organization has, even a company. It was long before the days of computers and advanced technology.

Q: What sort of work were the Engineers doing at Fort DuPont?

A: Just training. I reported there, I think, in September, and the next year we went up to Fort Dix to prepare some of the old mobilization barracks for National Guard occupancy later in the year.

Q: I see. So then you were at Fort Dix for awhile, and do you have any particular memories of this period? Was it just mainly a training period for you, learning the ropes as a young second lieutenant?

A: That was just about it. Learning how to administer a company, inventorying the post exchange, which you did every month in detail, keeping the company books, and drilling ad infinitum and things like that.

Q: I see. So then in September 1929, you went to Nicaragua?